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# Human Trafficking in China

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Although Chinese law prohibits forced and compulsory labor, including by children, serious problems of forced labor exist. For this reason, the People's Republic of China (PRC), a source, transit and destination country, has sustained a Tier 2 Watch List ranking for three consecutive years. Though Chinese men and women are trafficked abroad for forced labor and sexual exploitation, the majority of trafficking in China is internal.

Early this summer reports emerged of over one thousand farmers, teenagers and children, including some who were mentally handicapped, forced to work for little or no pay in scorching brick kilns, enduring beatings and confinement in worse than prison-like conditions. This was a form of modern day slavery that shocked not only the international community, but prompted an outcry among Chinese citizens and a forceful reaction from the authorities.

In response, the Chinese government organized a joint task force to investigate and punish forced labor practices. By mid-August, the joint task force reported that it had inspected 277,000 brick kilns and other small-scale enterprises nationwide, and had rescued 1,340 workers from forced labor conditions, including 367 mentally handicapped workers and an undisclosed number of children. In connection with the crackdown, Chinese authorities arrested 147 individuals for such crimes as using child labor and physically assaulting workers, with sentences of up to five years in prison. At least four county-level government officials were charged with dereliction of duty, and at least one brick kiln foreman was sentenced to death, one trafficker sentenced to life in prison, and one brick kiln owner sentenced to nine years in prison.

The trade of women and girls for sexual exploitation is another clear trafficking challenge for the Chinese government. Although prostitution is illegal, the burgeoning illicit sex industry creates a vulnerability for sex trafficking. Women and children are trafficked into the country from North Korea, Vietnam, Burma, Mongolia, and Thailand. Chinese women are also trafficked abroad for sexual exploitation. The government's main challenges in this area include their punishment of victims, poor victim protection services, and lack of transparency in criminal law enforcement by not fully disclosing what the government is doing to enforce laws against trafficking in people.

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and non-governmental organizations have a number of ongoing prevention and education projects in affected provinces. In the past five years, China has established transfer, training and recovery centers for trafficking victims in four provinces, and has assisted more than 1,000 trafficked women and children. ACWF works closely with law enforcement agencies and border officials to raise their awareness of the problem of trafficking.

In addition, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has recently begun a new project to work closely with the China Enterprise Confederation to educate entrepreneurs, owners, and managers of various enterprises that in the past have been linked to trafficking, such as hotels, karaoke bars, restaurants, bars, and massage parlors.

North Korean women crossing the border are generally most vulnerable to trafficking given their illegal status in China and their inability to return home. Conditions in the Democratic Peoples

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Republic of Korea (DPRK) drive many North Koreans to seek a way out of the country, putting them at risk of becoming trafficking victims. The trend of North Korean women trafficked into and within China for forced marriage is well-documented by non-government organizations and international organizations. A potential factor, among others, in the trafficking of brides is the gender imbalance caused by China's one-child policy. All agree that neither the PRC nor the DPRK is doing enough to prevent or punish the practice of forced marriage. Non-government organizations and international organizations find it difficult to work independently in the PRC, so little assistance reaches this vulnerable group.

A core principle of an effective anti-trafficking strategy is the protection of victims. Unfortunately, China classifies North Korean refugees as "economic migrants" and forcibly returns them to the DPRK where, in all likelihood, they will be severely punished or even executed for escaping. The PRC stands by this policy, and has shown no resolve in treating North Korean victims in line with international agreements to which it is a signatory. China's poor transparency and the political sensitivity of the issue hamper our efforts to effectively advocate for change on this issue.

Nevertheless, China has engaged with the U.S. government and international and non-governmental organizations to work on other anti-trafficking initiatives, and has made some progress. China recently hosted a Children's Forum in Beijing, a joint project sponsored by the ILO and organized by the ACWF that brought child representatives from across the country to discuss measures to prevent vulnerable youth from being trafficked and to increase protection and prevention. They drafted a document of recommendations that were presented at the COMMIT Second Ministerial in Beijing in December 2007. COMMIT, a regional anti-trafficking initiative, has been given positive assessments from the United Nations Interagency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP)'s regional technical leadership. Prior to the Second Ministerial, the anti-trafficking unit of China's Ministry of Public Security is expected to release a long-awaited National Action Plan on Trafficking.

Ultimately, however, China's persistent challenges with human trafficking are intimately related to overall questions of rule of law and good governance. A vibrant and healthy democracy affords full dignity and rights for women, prostituted people, and foreign migrants. A free society recognizes the critical role of civil society cooperation with government. We have seen here at home that non-government organizations are critical in our efforts to identify victims of trafficking and ultimately to assist them. Governments must hold exploiters including recruiters, pimps, employers, and complicit officials to fullest account, most notably with harsh sentencing.

As the world takes an increasingly close look at China's human rights record, we should remember to keep issues of forced labor and sexual exploitation in mind as part of the equation.